

Going Grassroots: Visiting the Foreign Locales of Arkansas and Southwest Texas

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, OCT 19 2017

One of the great things about travel is surprise. In recent months, I had the opportunity to drive through the United States to several locations that I had never seen. Most of my travel over the years has ironically been overseas in various parts of the Middle East; North Africa; Europe; the Soviet Union (when it was the Soviet Union); Kenya; the Caribbean; Southeast Asia; and even Canada. This time, I had the opportunity to drive through Arkansas and West Texas. I can recommend both to anyone wanting to visit a new and refreshing local culture not yet homogenized by the great thrust of globalization.

We traveled by car and tent, camping at local KOA tent sites, another means of travel that I can recommend to those wanting to see the United States at a more grassroots level than the Hilton or Sheraton will allow. The irony of the KOA is its multiplicity – or, perhaps better stated, its polarism. KOAs, in my still limited experience, include tent campers and RV campers. RV-ers basically seem to carry their hotel with them; they make up their own sub-culture in the United States, and they are many. On the other hand, many KOA establishments are extremely friendly to tents (which bring in less revenue) and take great care to make beautiful, picturesque sites for tents reasonably away from the large RV camper vehicles. KOAs are notoriously “good-kids,” so they are safe. In other KOAs, a few meagre tent sites are sandwiched in among the RVs for a less picturesque (although still perfectly functional) camping experience. Tent sites are very reasonably priced by comparison to hotels, and one is guaranteed that certain degree of cleanliness and decorum that comes with one’s own tent (by comparison with some of your less expensive hotel fare). Rest rooms always include showers (usually hot), and most are quite nice. Bring plastic sandals, of course. KOAs can be either very hot or very cold since you are at-one with the outdoors if you are tent-camping, so make sure you know the local temperatures for the time you are planning to visit.

The most shocking find of this particular trip for me was in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Hot Springs is, apparently, the childhood home of Bill Clinton, and the former stomping grounds of the Roosevelts and their ilk for its early 20th century spa of the well-to-do, the remnants of which still stand for tourists of all sorts to view and enjoy.

To explain why Hot Springs was shocking to my sensibilities, I must digress briefly to a seemingly completely unrelated topic: Nazi architecture. While I am no expert on the topic, I can safely say that one notable thing about Nazi architecture was its emphasis on monumental architecture, which drew explicitly from a range of models from the ancient world (Roman, Egyptian, etc.).

So, there I was, in the middle of the Ozark Mountains, one of the most modest places in the U.S. In its history and modesty, it is a region not dissimilar to the Appalachians. It is one of the homes of Bluegrass music, one of my favorite late-modern musical forms, but one not typically seen as high in stature or up there with Opera (a great injustice in my opinion). We were camping and decided to drive into town to find out what the springs of Hot Springs were all about. We found the bathhouse row and were instantly confronted with a megalith building called – I kid you not – *The Sanitarium*. To beat all, it is still a working sanitarium (although it apparently may have other functions as well). I did not know that we still had sanitariums in the U.S., but there you go. Beneath *The Sanitarium* was a row of bathhouses varying in style from Roman to Greek to Arabian to Alpine. Across the street from the bathhouses on one end of the boulevard was a large classical looking building; another building that could be the Tower of Babel itself

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(or perhaps an effort to re-build the Holy of Holies of Jerusalem's Second Temple); and something not quite deco and not quite classical, but a strange and quite beautiful in-between. I was awestruck, took a deep breath, and said out loud: "It's a whole downtown of Nazi architecture!"

Nazi architecture aside – certainly an historical artifact rather than a reflection of current day local politics – the people in Hot Springs were unusually warm, kind, and welcoming. The KOA was the nicest KOA we had the opportunity to visit, and the most relaxing. All-in-all, it was a wonderful visit. I can recommend it highly. And, if you are an aficionado of early-20th century fascist history, you can study the local buildings and decide if you agree with my visceral response to the downtown architecture.

In Southern Texas, we stayed in the San Antonio KOA. It was lovely. First, I should say, and most significantly: it was gated. A gated KOA seems, somehow, like an oxymoron. But, there you go, it was a gated KOA. It was gorgeous. It kept lots of space between the RV campers and the tents (yeah!). It had a lovely, working pool. And, oh, yeah, did I mention that it was gated? San Antonio seemed less like two cities, ethnically, than like two countries in one small space. The tension was tangible (be careful to steer clear of self-styled guards asking for *bakshish* at local parking lots). In Southern Texas, it appeared to this outsider that everything south of San Antonio is basically Mexico in all but name. And, I must say, it is gorgeous! I am speaking only for myself and impressionistically, of course. Institutionally, I cannot tell you since I do not specialize in U.S. (or Texan) politics.

Next, Southwest Texas was stunningly beautiful: sparsely populated, high desert (around 4000 feet elevation). It has some of the most stunningly beautiful country I have ever seen – you can almost imagine the dinosaurs trudging around the high mountain plains. It was just as stunningly poor. Most of the towns are border towns, or close to it. One cannot know who is a "legal" citizen and who is not. Coming from Florida, I was already aware of the non-legal migrant population used as slaves in all but name, with no papers to guarantee their civil rights within normalized political institutions. I can only assume that the same is true in Southwest Texas, where everyone was, nonetheless, overwhelmingly kind and welcoming.

All of this is to say, there is still cultural variation, even in United States. Come to Arkansas and Southwest Texas to see it! If you really want to see it, you may want to go grassroots. (And, for the "Americanist" researchers among us, how about trying on some political ethnography for size in these local – and quite amazing – political communities.)

About the author:

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